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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 ANALYZES SINIORA'S SPEECH AND
OTHER PUBLIC STATEMENTS

REF: A. BEIRUT 646

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 642

[1](#)C. BEIRUT 618

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) According to March 14 supporters, Prime Minister Siniora's speech was on target and he projected a confident image. Hizballah reaction, predictably, was negative: Siniora had criticized the Lebanese Armed Forces' performance and proposed ideas from Future Movement leader Saad Hariri that had already been rejected. March 14 supporters noted they would be more reassured if there were frequent and regularly scheduled updates from cabinet members. Finally, Nasrallah was characterized by March 14 supporters as "on the defensive and less-polished" in his March 8 speech, while Aoun seems to be trying to playing both sides in the strategic communications battle. End Summary.

Strategic Communications Analysis

[1](#)2. (C) Embassy Beirut consulted with Chris Reid, a Beirut-based political communications strategist who is serving as an advisor to March 14. (Note: This is a MEPI-funded project that has been operational since September [1](#)2007. End Note.) Having spent the day with working-level March 14 colleagues, Reid provided feedback on how "messaging" from PM's speech and other recent statements by public figures was being received. He also told us that Saad Hariri's Future Party was gearing up to prepare daily "talking points," something Reid has been recommending to March 14 as a whole for months. According to Reid, March 14 has rarely presented such a unified strategic communications front. "This is ironic considering that key figures are in lockdown in their residences and cannot meet face-to-face."

Siniora's Speech Was Reassuring

[1](#)3. (C) Siniora's speech was well-received by March 14 working-level contacts. They describes his message as clear and firm. They appreciated the fact that he characterized the situation as neither a Sunni/Shia conflict nor as a battle between the opposition and the majority. Rather, the blame was placed on Iranian-financed terrorists who were

attacking the people of Lebanon. There was high praise for the Siniora's image: calm, cool, defiant, and in control. They added that, unlike Nasrallah's appearance on May 8, Siniora was not perspiring but looked well-groomed and physically hearty.

¶4. (C) Some had been disappointed that Siniora had not spoken to the nation earlier. However, Reid believes that this may have been the right move. During the most violent times, Lebanese citizens will first turn to their confessional leaders. By waiting for an operational pause in the fighting, Siniora may have given the Lebanese people a chance to return their thoughts to the national leaders and institutions.

¶5. (C) There was some complaints that a firm and immediate action plan had not been specifically outlined. This left a few to ask, "What now?" However, they praised Siniora's call for a moment of silence on May 11 at 1200 local time. It is unsafe for March 14 supporters to gather in the streets. They will have an opportunity to express their support for the Lebanese nation by hanging flags on their balconies and observing a national moment of unity.

Geagea Did All the Right Things

¶6. (C) Reid and March 14 contacts were also impressed by Geagea's public profile on May 9. Geagea perfectly delivered the March 14 "talking points" and also managed to allay fears that the Lebanese Forces (LF) would "take the opposition's bait" by sending armed forces into the streets. Though Aoun

BEIRUT 00000650 002 OF 003

frequently paints LF as a "militia" and a "gang of thugs," Geagea's statesman-like performance took the wind out of Aoun's arguments.

¶7. (C) Reid also said that the public image of some fifty March 14 leaders, safe and sound, gathered at Geagea's house on May 9 reassured supporters. It convinced many that, despite the fact that Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt must stay in their residences, the rest of March 14 is strong and functioning.

¶8. (C) Reid said that Geagea and Gemayel's separate statements after the May 9 meeting were useful. The message, "We are with our besieged brothers," demonstrated Christian-Sunni-Druze unity.

Jumblatt Needed to Speak Frequently and Did

¶9. (C) Reid said that Walid Jumblatt gave several media interviews on May 8 - 9, which contrasted sharply with Siniora's earlier silence from the Grand Serail. However, Reid thought this was necessary to counter rumors about Jumblatt's safety and well-being.

March 14 Needs Regular Briefing Schedule

¶10. (C) Reid has advocated that March 14 set up a frequent and regular briefing schedule. He thinks Ministers Fatfat and Hamedeh are effective communicators and suggests that other cabinet members be added to the rotation. In other countries, it would be odd not to hear from the Acting Foreign Minister or the Defense Minister. However, this does not seem to overly disturb the Lebanese.

Aoun Tries to Play Both Sides

¶11. (C) Reid told us that March 14 contacts sneered at Aoun's attempt to "game" both sides of this story. Aoun was deploring the violence, and yet supporting the political

goals of Hizballah. Reid believes Aoun will use his alliance with Hizballah to claim credit for the fact that Christian neighborhoods in Beirut have remained safe. "There is great appeal among the Lebanese for an alliance with the powerful and dangerous -- sometimes it just doesn't matter who is the good guy in the fight."

Nasrallah's Defensive Tactics

¶12. (C) Reid, who laments that Hizballah SYG Nasrallah remains one of the most effective strategic communicators in Lebanon, found parts of his March 8 speech defensive. March 14 contacts commented that Nasrallah was trying to play down the Sunni/Shia dimension of the conflict and also tried to defeat the March 14 talking point that "Hizballah had turned its weapons inward." Nasrallah blamed the current telecommunications system dispute on Jumblatt and referred to his March 14 opponents as "armed militias." March 14 contacts noted that Nasrallah was sweating and that his delivery was less polished than in previous speeches.

¶13. (C) The Hizballah-led opposition responded immediately after Siniora's speech with only brief statements. Al Manar television station, controlled by Hizballah, said that Siniora had criticized the LAF's performance and proposed suggestions that had already been put forth by Saad Hariri.

¶14. (C) Our Public Diplomacy FSNs report that pro-opposition media contacts are also having difficulties getting on-the-record reactions from Hizballah or Aoun loyalists on the Siniora speech. This lack of pro-active opposition "spin doctors" for three days suggests that there may be a deliberate Hizballah/opposition media blackout. Media contacts tell our FSNs that Hizballah members are talking only off-the-record. Hizballah is pleased that Siniora criticized the respected national institution of the LAF and they criticize the U.S. and international reactions to date as "puny." However, Amal leader and Speaker of Parliament

BEIRUT 00000650 003 OF 003

Nabih Berri was reportedly furious with the attacks on the pro-March 14 media stations on May 9 and is telling contacts that clearly it was done by "pro-Syrian" elements. He was also reportedly against the closure of the airport, but was overruled by the Hizballah leadership.
SISON